

Edgar Lee Masters

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Edgar Lee Masters was a well-known poet and author. He was born in Garnett, Kansas, son to Hardin Wallace Masters and Emma J. Dexter. As an infant, his family moved to western Illinois where he grew up on his grandfather's farm.

Edgar's life began to form in his early years when he started going to public schools in Petersburg and Lewistown. Later, he spent a year in an academy with hopes to gain admission to Knox College. Instead, his father encouraged him to pursue a career of law like himself. Thus, he decided to read law with his father instead of going to college. He later formed his own law partnership in 1893 with Kickham Scanlan. It lasted until 1903. Through the next several years of his life, Masters began writing a series of poems and plays under the pseudonym Dexter Wallace. This was the beginning of Edgar Lee Masters's literary career.

In 1909, Edgar received a copy of Epigrams from the Greek mythology from Marion Reedy, an editor of Reedy's Mirror St. Louis. This book, along with long talks with his mother about the people he grew up with, influenced his greatest contribution to American literature—Spoon River Anthology. On May 20, 1914, Edgar and his mother reunited to discuss the times and people that had slipped past his memory during his childhood in Illinois. Ending their long discussions, he began to write the minute he got home. He then realized the idea of how he could fit it all into a book and how he could give misunderstood souls another chance to "live again" and be judged on the opinion from his own words.

The Spoon River Anthology is a collection of some 250 moving and bitter graveside epitaphs that grasp small-town America, Midwestern values, and the distress of modern life. This is Edgar Lee Masters's most recognized and greatest achievement in his writing. Many diverse people speak in this collection of inscriptions such as drunkards, judges, poets, atheists, preachers, gamblers, and druggists. The dramatic device of having dead people speak their own epitaphs was the vehicle for Master's brilliance. He used these epitaphs to show the hidden side of American life. They gave an edge to the normal writings that used to be printed and read daily. Masters's speakers from beyond the grave brought the buried truth into the daylight.

Masters continued publishing poetry, novels, essays, and biographies for nearly thirty years, though none of them had the success that Spoon River Anthology did. After Spoon River, he began to write on many subjects and in different styles from poetry to fictional novels. He wrote The New Spoon River in several volumes that were set on the Illinois prairies. He drew upon his knowledge of law and wrote Doomsday Book and The Fate of the Jury. Later he began to write on some of his favorite interests such as mid-western landscape and tributes to land and prairie myths. In the 1920s and 1930s, he started writing fictional and biographical novels. Some of these were about his childhood experiences and his friends such as Mitch Miller who died in 1879. He also started to write controversial biographies such as Lincoln: The Man and Mark Twain: A Portrait. Masters thought that biographies were a chance to correct misjudged characters and heroes in history. This made Masters a very biased and opinionated man.

After a rough personal life that included difficulties between two jobs, a hard divorce, and an overlooked career of writing, he retired in not very good health.

Throughout the 1940s he received several awards for his literary work, some of them being the Poetry Society of America medal, the Shelley Memorial Award, and the Academy of America Poets Fellowship.

Spoon River Anthology became one of the most widely read books during a time that people were fascinated with psychology. It brought a new kind of realism to poetry. It has been updated for the stage with music and the reputation and demand for the book has continued. [From Ronald Primeau, “Edgar Lee Masters (1869-1950)” *Modern American Poetry* http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/masters/masters.htm (Nov. 15, 2005); Kathryn Van Spanckeren, “The Rise of Realism: 1860-1914: Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950)”;
<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/LIT/masters.htm> (Nov. 17, 2005).]